



Global Intelligence Alliance

# **KEY SUCCESS FACTORS OF COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE**

**GIA WHITE PAPER 4/2004**

## Executive Summary

This paper examines and discusses the key success factors in developing a functional intelligence program for an organization. A critical success factor in Competitive Intelligence can be defined as an item related to intelligence process that is key for ensuring the success of the process.

While the key success factors are valid for all intelligence programs, no single system architecture can be found appropriate for developing a successful intelligence program. This is due to cultural and structural issues that are highly company-specific.

It can be argued that *the most important success factor* for any intelligence program is **obtaining the support from top management**. If Competitive Intelligence is to become an ongoing activity within the organization, it must be used and promoted by senior management.

In order to be successful, an intelligence program must **meet the needs of its users**. Another key requirement to intelligence is to enhance the decision-making processes.

After accurately identifying the intelligence needs the next step is to meet those needs through systematical **intelligence product development**. A Competitive Intelligence product can be defined as the output of intelligence activities, i.e. output of the systematical process of information collection and analysis.

Another essential success factor is **continuity** of the intelligence program. Intelligence provides the basis for making long-range plans and creating strategies, hence Competitive Intelligence should be an iterative process, not a one-time program. **Qualified human resources** are also critical in order to ensure the high quality of an intelligence operation.

Finally, **using the right tools** is critical, since they help management access the intelligence they need, making utilization more effective and timely.

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines and discusses the key success factors in developing a functional intelligence program for an organization. Many writers have addressed this topic and listed several important issues affecting the management of intelligence process. This particular paper studies the views of a number of authors and focuses on a few main themes, classifying the key success factors that may lead the intelligence program to prosper.

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A critical success factor in Competitive Intelligence can be defined as an item related to intelligence process that is key for ensuring

the success of the process. It is important to define and characterize these factors in order to make it easier to recognize and address them. After all, the consequence of neglecting matters essential to the intelligence process may cause the extinction of the whole intelligence function.

Stanat (1990) points out that no single system architecture can be found appropriate for developing a successful intelligence program. This is due to cultural and structural issues that are highly company-specific. Therefore, the intelligence program is likely to be unique in each organization. It is argued that successful intelligence programs rarely imitate each other. Although this White Paper presents some general success factors and guidelines, one must remember that an intelligence program should always reflect the culture, organization, available resources and goals of each specific company. (Gilad&Gilad 1985; Fuld 1991.)

## 2. Management Support and Understanding

Obtaining the support from top management is often regarded as the most important success factor for any intelligence program. If Competitive Intelligence is to become an ongoing activity within the organization, it must be used and

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promoted by senior management. Even if Competitive Intelligence was a formal program in the organization and various sources of intelligence were utilized, without the support of senior management it only has a chance of being a management resource in a reactive way (Coburn 1999). That is why it is vital for intelligence

operations to have full senior management commitment and an operating mandate from the top. An intelligence strategy must have full support at board level if it is to succeed (Bird 1997; Kahaner 1996). One critical issue for a successful intelligence program is financial resources, but, in order for the program to have adequate funding, management support is needed.

It is often the responsibility of or professional challenge for those responsible for an intelligence function in an organization to educate management. The management team must share a common understanding of what intelligence really is about. It is also essential to make sure management has the available intelligence at their fingertips (Herring 2000).

There are three ways that management support for intelligence activities can be initiated (Coburn 1999):

1. When a senior executive takes initiative, he or she proactively promotes and supports such activities. Some executives come to value formal intelligence systems somewhere along their careers. These executives can be described as forward-looking visionaries and they tend to surround themselves with subordinates who also promote and value intelligence operations.
2. Senior management takes action after getting a “wake-up call”, after being blind-sided or surprised in some situation. A surprise can be a harmless close call or, in a worse case scenario, a life-threatening danger for the organization, such as the launch of a new superior product by a competitor.
3. The intelligence function of the organization takes initiative. If this is to happen, the initiative must be carefully designed in order to be successful. Plans that seem too vague will most likely be rejected by management. Moreover, varied and individual needs of the senior executives within the organization must be addressed.

### 3. Identifying and Meeting Intelligence Needs

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In order to be successful, an intelligence program must meet the needs of its users. Identifying those needs at the beginning of a new intelligence program or a new task for an established intelligence unit is a critical success element (Herring 1997). Being needs-oriented means defining the exact intelligence needs of the organization and keeping the business focus clearly in mind at all times. In addition to fulfilling the user needs, intelligence must be actionable. Sawka (1996) notes: “Competitive Intelligence is actionable knowledge and foreknowledge about the external operating environment. In order for the whole program to

function properly, it is essential that intelligence is adequately utilized. If the benefits are not stated and the outcome is not effectively exploited, the whole function will be likely to fail in the long run. That is why intelligence can be considered useless unless utilized.”

It is senior management that provides purpose and focus for the intelligence program. According to Herring (1997), *purpose* is the most important element in any intelligence program. Although specific intelligence needs naturally differ in different companies and businesses, the basic types of intelligence needs are the same.

Early warning is the primary objective of intelligence operations. This refers to early warning of *both opportunities and threats*. Though it is easy to comprehend the importance of identifying the impending threats, in today’s business environment it is becoming increasingly important to alert management to new and future business opportunities. This is becoming a primary responsibility of an intelligence system.

In addition, intelligence should enhance the decision-making processes. Major decisions each

company faces every year will affect the company's success now and in the future. Decisions affected by external forces that require intelligence support include:

- Entering new markets and businesses
- Acquiring and investing in new technologies
- Making major capital investments (particularly those involving foreign entities)
- Selecting strategic partners, forging alliances and making acquisitions
- Implementing trade and public policy initiatives

When planning an intelligence program the following issues should be considered (Whitely 1996):

- How to provide an **early warning of opportunities and threats** such as new acquisitions or alliances and future competitive products and services.
- How to ensure greater **management awareness of changes among competitors**; making the organization better able to adapt and respond appropriately.
- How to ensure that **strategic planning decisions are based on relevant and timely intelligence**.

In order to succeed in meeting intelligence needs, the intelligence function must both create new information and wisely apply the existing information (Koski 2000). The aim of Competitive Intelligence is to produce added value to an

organization by combining those two types of information. According to Marchand (1999) there are four basic ways to use information in order to achieve added value. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

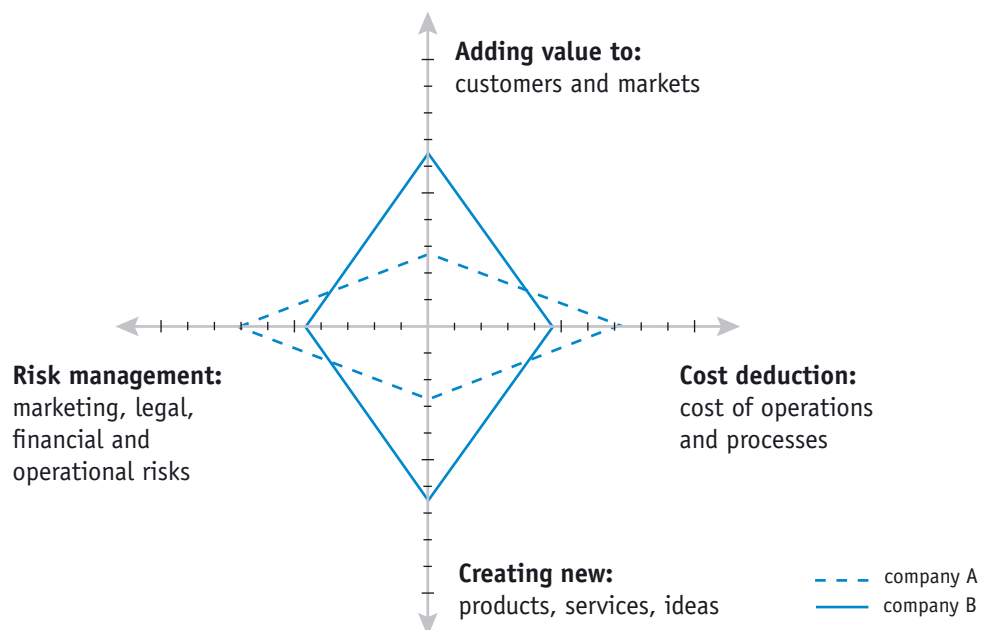


Figure 1. Bringing value-added by using information, source: Marchand 1999

The axes in the figure illustrate how well companies are able to use information in competition. Naturally, not all companies are able to manage information equally well on every axis, which provides opportunities for competing companies. The first and oldest way to bring added value to business is *risk management*, through which functions such as financing and accounting were created. These functions are the major users of information technology resources.

Another way to add value is *cost deduction*. This means developing operations and follow-up processes as economical and efficient as possible in order to reach the results wanted. This view is concerned with concepts such as re-engineering and continuous development. Many companies concentrate on bringing *added value to customers* with their products and services in order to control demand and build customer loyalty. This happens not only after sales, but also before and during sales. This entails investing in sales systems, customer profiling and maintenance.

Finally, another way to use information is to *create something new*: products, services and/or techniques. The companies strong on this axis continuously try to invent something new.

In practice, every company applies a combination of the actions described above. For example, organizations like Company B in Figure 1 concentrate on using information in creating something new and adding value to their customers on the vertical axis, while organizations like Company A concentrate on activities on the horizontal axis and minimize risks and reduce costs.

Intelligence program can help to meet all these four challenges in a more efficient way.

At the same time, it is essential not to misunderstand what the purpose of intelligence analysis is. According to Herring (2000), most intelligence analyses look too much like "business reports", whereas they should produce intelligence in distinct formats that communicate *purpose, responsibility, credibility and actionability*.

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For example, it is important to understand the differences between "market research" and "intelligence". Market research estimations are based on past habits. By using competitor surveillance, it is possible for companies to observe the actions of other players in the market. Intelligence, however, examines the most important issue from the decision-making point of view: the *future*. It seeks to answer the basic question of what imperceptible changes are occurring that will ultimately have an effect on the company's business (Waters 1996). Additionally, market research often focuses on fulfilling only one specific information need or set of needs, while intelligence can be described as an ongoing process of constructing a comprehensive picture of the whole operating environment, including competitors, customers, suppliers and markets. This way, intelligence continuously contributes to an organization's knowledge base and leads to cumulative organizational learning.

Kahaner (1996) and Vaarnas et al (1998) bring the aspect of learning to the discussion of intelligence utilization. Intelligence serves as a method of learning from the successes and failures of others. In addition, any new technologies, products, and processes in the market need to be learned. It is argued that the first priority is to use the internal intelligence as a source for learning in organizations.

To conclude this chapter, we now return to discussing effective utilization of intelligence. The fundamental issue is to produce "real" and valid intelligence, therefore the importance of accurately identifying *intelligence needs* cannot be over-emphasized. The next step is to meet those needs, and the solution is systematical *intelligence product development*. It should be noted here that although it could also be defined as a critical success factor, a better approach

**A Competitive Intelligence product can be defined as the output of intelligence activities, i.e. output of the systematical process of information collection and analysis.**

is to think of it as the glue holding the five factors together as an on-going CI development activity.

The term *product development* means standardizing the production process of Competitive Intelligence products. From the intelligence customer's point of view, a Competitive Intelligence product can be defined as the output of intelligence activities, i.e. output of the systematical process of information collection and analysis. The production process is a combination of re-engineering possibly existing intelligence products and producing completely new ones. Adapting Wang & Lee (1998), the four fundamental things to consider in intelligence product development are:

- The exact intelligence needs must be understood and identified before producing the intelligence products.

- The intelligence products must be outcomes of a well-specified production process and that way serve the identified intelligence needs.

- Information must be considered as a product with a lifecycle.

- Every intelligence product must be appointed a responsible owner, a product manager, who leads and manages the intelligence production process.

Product development is a part of managing the whole intelligence cycle including analyzing user needs, collecting information, performing analyses, communicating intelligence, storing, and finally, utilizing it.

One way to successful product development is to look at the process itself as a product. This means standardizing the phases of developing intelligence products. By standardizing the phases, we always know what has to be done, which questions need to be answered and which problems need to be tackled.

## 4. Continuity

In today's business world it is not enough just to have the right information. The quality of information naturally makes a difference, but what one uses the information for is even more important (Kahaner 1997). According to studies by Zack (2000), a connection between the strategy of a company and the intelligence needs of individuals at different levels of the organization must exist in order for the company to succeed in its business. This means adapting the formulated intelligence strategy to the business strategy of the company. Bernhardt (1997) takes the idea of vital intelligence even further by calling intelligence "the lifeblood of strategy".

He argues that a strategy without intelligence is not strategy, it is merely guessing.

Intelligence provides the basis for making long-range plans and creating strategies (Herring 1997). That is why continuity of the intelligence program is so essential. Competitive Intelligence and strategic planning should be iterative processes, not one-time programs. It is management's responsibility to encourage long-range planning for the intelligence program in order to maintain constant watch over the environment and to collect information on a continual basis, not just in spurts (Coburn 1999; Fuld 1991).

A plan is the driver of a successful intelligence program. Linking intelligence plans to strategic plans can ensure an actionable and proactive process (Coburn 1999). According to Pollard (2000) it must be made sure that intelligence operations improve the performance of the business. *The benefits of intelligence can only be maximized if the right intelligence strategy is developed.* The appropriate intelligence strategy includes the following phases: First, correct information is collected from valid sources. That information is processed and communicated to the right people, in a proper manner and at the right time. At this point, the efficiency of storing and retrieval processes plays an important role. The right people then analyze the information and take appropriate action based on it (Pollard 2000).

There are four basic intelligence operations that the intelligence unit must continuously perform (Herring 1997). These operations include:

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collecting information, reporting, analyzing and forecasting, and disseminating intelligence. In addition, the unit should be capable of providing the four primary intelligence functions: providing early warning, supporting different strategic and operational processes, and assessing and monitoring competitors (Figure 2). Besides, the ultimate responsibility of the intelligence unit is to gather counterintelligence on which the security program of the company can be based to protect the company’s own intellectual property.



*Figure 2. Competitive Intelligence system operations and functions, source: Herring 1997*

To ensure the continuity it is very important to have plans prepared in case some of the key persons should leave the program. This is a fundamental factor in maintaining a successful intelligence program in the long run. According to Herring (2000), the cause of most intelligence program failures is not being prepared when the "sponsor" moves on. Having a transition plan is a way of managing the situation when the program loses some of its key resources.

Herring continues that this is also a way of creating support within the management team: proving to them that the program is carefully planned and all possible scenarios have been considered is a way to achieve credibility in the

eyes of the senior managers. A transition plan must include other key resources also. It is not enough to only anticipate losing manager-level resources; critical resources exist on all levels of an intelligence program.

Finally, one important prerequisite to continuity is *successful intelligence product development*. The intelligence processes and products must be designed and constructed in a way that they respond to changing user intelligence needs and can be updated and refined over time. Like intelligence products, the whole intelligence program has a continuous, cycle-like lifetime. If not updated and followed-up on a constant basis, it will become out-dated and inefficient.

## 5. Qualified Human Resources

**An Intelligence Manager's business experience and credibility in the eyes of top management cannot be emphasized enough.**

An Intelligence Manager's business experience and credibility in the eyes of top management cannot be emphasized enough. It is essential to have qualified people in the intelligence program. The staff must be trained and dedicated. They must be capable of carrying out a variety of basic intelligence activities in a professional and proficient manner (Herring 1997).

An important issue to consider when trying to achieve management support and commitment is the selection of the right person to manage the intelligence program. This person's business experience and credibility in the eyes of top management cannot be emphasized enough. The skills that an intelligence manager should possess must be clearly defined and developed. The most important of these is the ability to

manage internal customers, information suppliers and the whole intelligence production process. Other attributes, such as good business acumen, strong communication skills and courage to tell the truth, are also considered essential. Management participation in the selection of the intelligence manager, or at least their approval, is a key foundation of a successful intelligence program (Pollard 2000; Herring 2000).

**Trust is the oil that lubricates the flow of information through an organization.**

In addition to properly selecting the intelligence manager, the critical nature of *internal sources of information* to intelligence programs must be understood. Individuals are the most important carriers of knowledge in the organization. They have acquired tacit knowledge over the years and that makes knowledge-intensive companies especially vulnerable. These knowledge workers can be replaced but only to a limited extent.

As such, it is very difficult to fill the gap in a specific knowledge area after the person with the know-how in that area leaves the organization. This causes a great challenge to organizations: how to get access to that individual information, and furthermore, how to transform it to organizational intelligence. Human resources do not only possess information, they also process it and produce new information. That is why it benefits the organization to develop programs that make people want to share their knowledge and acquire new knowledge (Iivonen & Huotari 2000; Den Hertog & Huizenga 2000). This requires developing employees' understanding about the role and goals of CI and competence in the area of information and knowledge sharing, as well as motivating them to share. While some direct motivation can be used (for instance, public recognition, bonuses, etc.), the indirect motivation through relevant organizational culture is even more important. One of the necessary attributes of such culture is trust.

Trust is a prerequisite for effective cooperation in an organization. The critical nature of trust is especially important in knowledge-intensive companies, where it is necessary to transform the knowledge of individuals into organizational knowledge (Iivonen & Huotari 2000). Cope (1998) regards trust as the oil lubricating the flow of information through the organization. When relationships in the organization are grounded in honesty and commitment, the flow of knowledge will be fluid. On the other hand, when groundings are based on backbiting, power bases etc., there will be internal friction slowing down the flow of knowledge. There are ways for a manager to establish trust within an organization. He/she can grant employees greater responsibilities and power to make decisions, encourage learning from mistakes, promote more open communication, dialogue, openness to multiple perspectives, etc.

The way trust affects the process of information flow is illustrated in Figure 3 (Cope 1998).

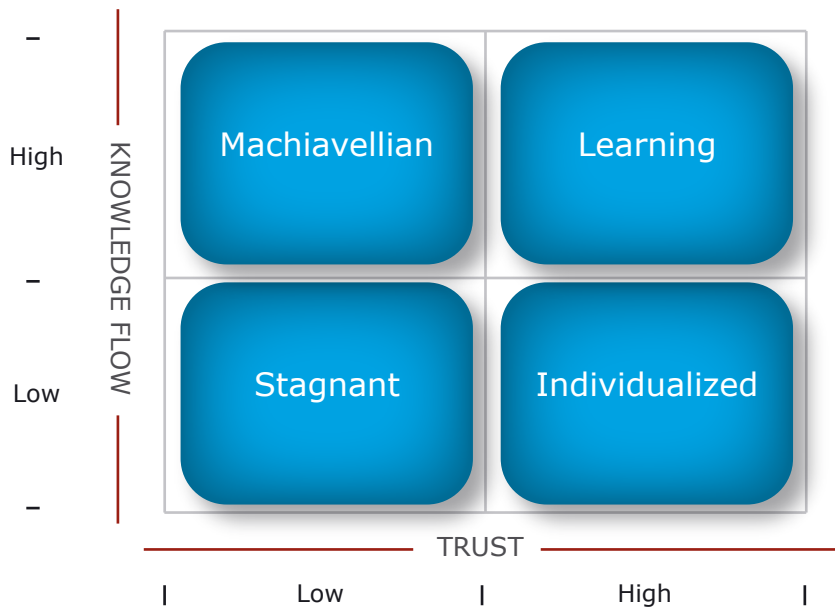


Figure 1. Trust and Knowledge Matrix, source: Cope 1998

Stagnant organizations have a problem of low trust and low flow of information. This does not necessarily mean that the organization is performing poorly at the moment. But stagnant organizations will not survive in the long run as they have only a limited capacity to create knowledge, which is becoming more and more essential in today's business world.

Organizations with high levels of knowledge flow existing in a climate of mistrust can be described as Machiavellian. Here, people use knowledge for personal gain and to maintain personal power centers.

In the individualized quadrant, the organizations have a high level of trust, but the benefits are not realized for the company as a whole. The reason may be that the company is built around individuals and focused teams. This may be a structural issue; people are physically distant from each other and therefore incapable of sharing ideas and knowledge.

**For companies in the learning quadrant the balance between trust and knowledge flow is achieved.**

Finally, for companies in the learning quadrant the balance between trust and knowledge flow is achieved. This means that sufficient trust exists to facilitate the creation of knowledge and the right systems and processes are in place to transport it across the company. As mentioned, the matrix does not indicate the effectiveness of the company at present. Nonetheless, the absence of either trust or knowledge flows is most likely to reduce the business's ability to compete in the long run.

In the context of human resources, it is also important to identify the gatekeepers of information in an organization so that the most important resources can be dedicated to the program and bottlenecks avoided. The importance of locating and identifying the sources of tacit knowledge in the organization cannot be emphasized enough. This is in fact one of the main goals of intelligence activities. The dangers of using tacit knowledge must nevertheless be considered. Though very important and beneficial, in some cases experience may prevent innovation and the ability to think 'outside the box'. "Experience teaches us confidence more than knowledge."

To conclude, "failing to understand the critical nature of human resources will lead to the slow death of an intelligence program" (Herring 2000).

## 6. Utilizing the Right Tools

**One way of obtaining management support for intelligence operations is to use the right tools. Tools help management access the intelligence they need, making utilization more effective and timely.**

When listing the most important factors in developing intelligence activities, tools and technology are often neglected. It goes without saying that using technology cannot and should not be the goal of the whole intelligence program. Processes are fundamental and should be implemented first in order to be able to identify the real intelligence needs, activate the right resources, analyze collected data, etc.

Nonetheless, technology and tools are vital for the success of intelligence programs; when utilized the right way, they make programs more effective. Using the right tools also provides help in dealing with previously mentioned success factors. For example, one way of obtaining management support is to use the right tools. Tools help management access the intelligence they need, making utilization more effective and timely. With their intelligence needs satisfied, managers realize the benefits of intelligence and commit to continue using intelligence as a support to decision making hence, making intelligence more actionable.

The correct tools are also essential for the continuity of intelligence activities. They help to disseminate and communicate the intelligence to users and provide the means for effective storing of intelligence. Through the use of appropriate tools, employees are encouraged to not only use intelligence but to produce intelligence content as well. Technology allows people far apart to share their knowledge and learn from other people. For example, for organizations located in the individualized quadrant in the Trust and Knowledge Matrix (Figure 3), in which the trust and willingness to share and learn is high, technology provides a tool for overcoming the obstacles hindering the knowledge flow. The organization can share knowledge in spite of time and place.

An issue to be kept in mind is that tools basically provide support for the intelligence process; it is the human resources that put the programs into practice. Managing knowledge is 10% about technology and 90% about human resources. If an organization is not able to effectively collect, store and communicate intelligence in an electronic format, the knowledge and skills of that organization will not be completely utilized (Zack 2000). Being able to utilize different technology tools is becoming more important in any business today, including the world of Competitive Intelligence. The rule of thumb should nevertheless be: first the process, then the IT system.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, there are five distinct success factors to be addressed when developing an effective intelligence program:

- Management support and understanding
- Intelligence needs as the basis for the program
- Continuity
- Qualified Human Resources
- Utilizing the right tools

These factors are closely connected and overlap in certain areas. Nonetheless, they are all important when developing intelligence activities. There are two other concepts that play an important role in Competitive Intelligence. *These are intelligence product development and internal marketing.* Though they could also have been defined as critical success factors, a better approach is to think of them as the glue holding the five factors together as on-going CI development activities. This is because both product development and

internal marketing have an impact on all of the above mentioned success factors. Internal marketing is one way of educating management and getting their support for intelligence activities. It is also a method for activating resources, making the program known within the organization, and communicating the benefits. Product development, on the other hand, goes hand in hand with meeting the user needs, with continuous development of the process and utilization of the right tools, not to mention management support.

To conclude, building up a successful intelligence program basically requires three things. The first thing is to be aware and understand that critical success factors described in this paper exist. Secondly, concrete steps must be taken in order to address them. Finally, long-term intelligence plans must be developed in order to continue to succeed in the future.

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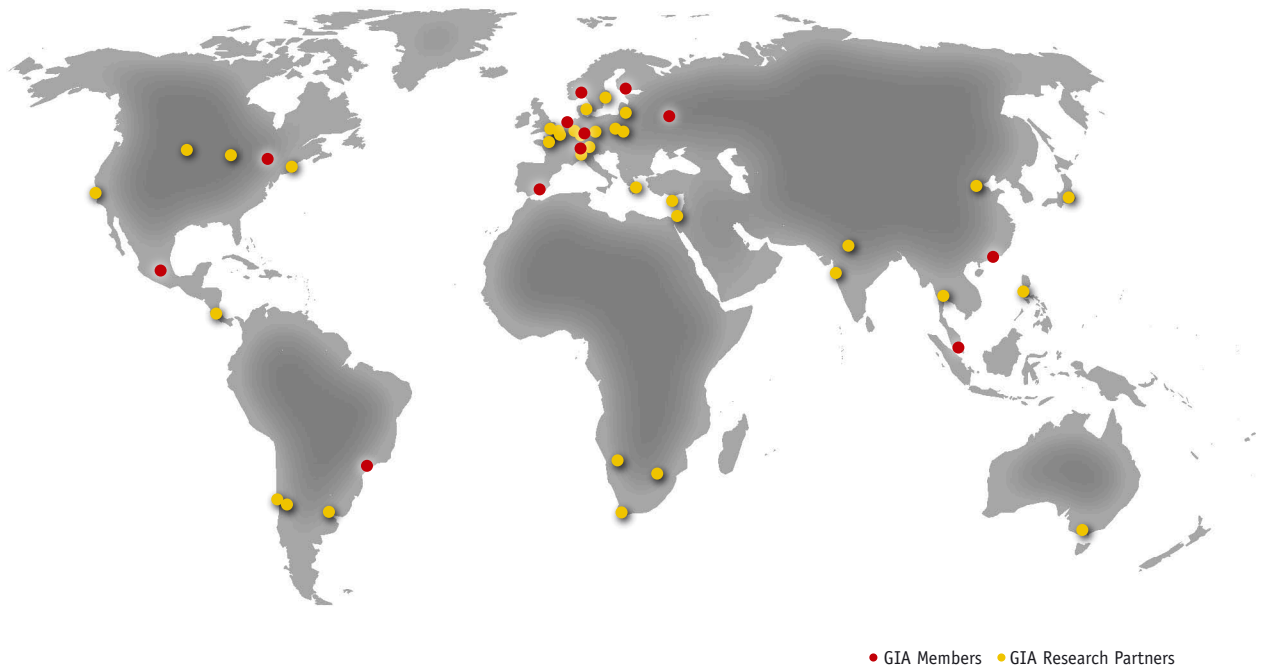
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